

# The Aesthetics of Sacred Space: Narrative, Metaphor, and Motion in *Ekphraseis* of Church Buildings

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## INTRODUCTION: THE PROBLEMS OF DESCRIPTION

Attempting to describe the interior of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople in the twelfth century, Michael the Deacon proclaimed the difficulty of the task: it is barely possible for anyone to encompass such a vast and varied subject in a discourse.<sup>1</sup> His complaint is, of course, a familiar rhetorical *topos*, part of the speaker's ritual *captatio benevolentiae*. But, like many *topoi*, it expresses a significant truth: description, the representation of the visual through the medium of the word, is a problematic enterprise that raises many questions. To what extent is it possible, for example, to represent a material object in an immaterial, intelligible medium such as language? How does one represent any static three-dimensional object in a medium that unfolds in time? How can one represent in words the totality of visual experience—the infinite varieties of color, space, depth, texture, light, and shade—offered by even the simplest object?<sup>2</sup>

The more one considers these questions, the more justified Michael's complaint seems, as do the words of Photios, who in his tenth homily claims that the church of the Virgin of the Pharos surpasses the canons (νόμοι) of *ekphrasis*, or the second-century rhetor Aelius Aristides, who points out that the city of Rome is too vast to see, let alone to describe.<sup>3</sup> Clearly a verbal description can never be entirely adequate to its object. This observation, self-evident as it may be, has important implications: the composition of

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<sup>1</sup>C. Mango and J. Parker, "A Twelfth-Century Description of St. Sophia," *DOP* 14 (1960): 233–45 (text by Michael the Deacon, referred to hereafter as Michael the Deacon, *Ekphrasis*), 1.22–26: οὐ χεῖρον δὲ καὶ λόγῳ περιηγήσασθαι, ὅσον ἔνι, μὴ γὰρ τὸ πᾶν, ἐπεὶ καὶ μόγις τοῦτ' αὐτὸ τις λόγου πρόφασιν ἐνστησάμενος τῷ παντὶ ἐπεξίει, ποικίλως ἔχοντι καὶ μακρῷ.

<sup>2</sup>For the discussion of these questions, see M. Beaujour, "Some Paradoxes of Description," *Yale French Studies* 61 (1981): 27–59. I would not seek to suggest that individual rhetoricians necessarily felt themselves at a loss when tackling such subjects, simply that the conventions of the genre within which they were working allowed for the expression of the real difficulties involved in describing.

<sup>3</sup>Photios, *Homiliai*, ed. B. Laourdas (Thessalonike, 1959), 10.7: τὸ κάλλιστόν τε εἶναι τὸν ναὸν καὶ ὡραιότατον καὶ νικῶντα νόμους ἐκφράσεως παραστήσαι προήρηται; Aelius Aristides, *To Rome*, in *Opera*, ed. B. Keil (Berlin, 1898), 2:39.1–2: περὶ ἧς [i.e., Rome] μὴ ὅτι εἰπεῖν κατὰ τὴν ἀξίαν ἔστιν, ἀλλ' οὐδ' ἰδεῖν ἀξίως αὐτήν.

any description involves the selection of the details to be included.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the linear unfolding of a text—still more of an orally delivered discourse—demands the imposition of a temporal order onto material that is in reality perceived simultaneously by a viewer. For although a work of art or architecture may be experienced sequentially, as one moves through the building or lets one's eyes travel across the scene, any single glance takes in more than could be expressed in a single statement.<sup>5</sup> These and other related questions have been highlighted by modern criticism, but they are relevant to the reading of descriptive writing from any period. As the inadequacy *topos* suggests, the classical and Byzantine rhetorical traditions may be seen to anticipate, albeit in less explicit terms, the observations of modern criticism. What is most interesting in the present context, however, is the particular response to the problem that one finds in Byzantine *ekphrasis*.

In this article I consider the literary problems involved in describing a subject as complex in appearance and function as a church building, and identify some of the strategies employed by authors of *ekphrasis* to tackle these difficulties. To some extent these strategies had their roots in the classical rhetorical tradition of *ekphrasis*, which I discuss briefly. But the description of the interior of a building as replete with meaning as was a church was a new task, for which there existed no direct precedent in the classical tradition, and thus it is particularly interesting to see how Byzantine authors approached this challenge. The present article is therefore first and foremost a study of the aesthetics of the literary and rhetorical representations of sacred space, concentrating precisely on those passages or aspects of the works that tell us little about the concrete fabric of the buildings, but much about how they could be written about and, perhaps, how they were perceived.

I concentrate in my survey on the descriptions of two major Constantinopolitan monuments, Hagia Sophia and the church of the Holy Apostles. In the sixth century, Justinian's first rebuilding of Hagia Sophia was celebrated by Prokopios of Caesarea, and his second by Paul the Silentiary.<sup>6</sup> Six centuries later, Michael the Deacon celebrated the "eternal novelty" of the building in a speech probably composed for the *encaenia*.<sup>7</sup> Constantine Rhodios's verse *ekphrasis* of the church of the Holy Apostles and the Wonders of Constantinople was dedicated to Constantine VII in the tenth century.<sup>8</sup> The occasion for the composition of Nikolaos Mesarites' prose *ekphrasis* of the Holy Apostles is unclear.<sup>9</sup> Other examples of *ekphrasis* provide useful comparisons with these works. The *ekphrasis* embedded within Eusebios's panegyric on Paulinos's new church at Tyre stands at the beginning of the tradition of *ekphrasis* of church buildings and for this reason deserves

<sup>4</sup>See, for example, R. Barthes, "L'effet de réel," in *Littérature et réalité*, ed. R. Barthes et al. (Paris, 1982), 86: "Si elle n'était pas soumise à un choix esthétique ou rhétorique toute 'vue' serait inépuisable par le discours."

<sup>5</sup>Beaujour, "Some Paradoxes."

<sup>6</sup>Prokopios, *Buildings* 1.1; Paul the Silentiary, *Ekphrasis of Hagia Sophia*, in P. Friedländer, *Johannes von Gaza und Paulus Silentiarius* (Leipzig, 1912), 227–65 (hereafter Paul the Silentiary, *Ekphrasis*).

<sup>7</sup>Mango and Parker, "Twelfth-Century Description."

<sup>8</sup>Constantine Rhodios, *Description des oeuvres d'art et de l'église des Saints Apôtres*, ed. E. Legrand (Paris, 1896) (hereafter Constantine Rhodios, *Ekphrasis*).

<sup>9</sup>Nikolaos Mesarites, *Description of the Church of the Holy Apostles*, ed. and trans. G. Downey, *TAPS*, n.s., 47 (1957): 855–924 (hereafter Mesarites, *Ekphrasis*). Downey suggests that it may have been composed in order to raise the prestige of the church after the imperial tombs were plundered by Alexios III in 1197.

particular attention. Chorikios's encomia of Bishop Marcian include some useful comments about the problems of describing, as do the homilies by Leo the Wise and Photios that celebrate newly restored or newly built churches.<sup>10</sup>

These *ekphraseis* of church buildings have traditionally been used as sources of information for reconstruction and mirrors of the realities they describe.<sup>11</sup> In the case of the Holy Apostles the complete destruction of the actual monument has made the need for this type of reading particularly acute. But the problems involved in such referential readings are notorious;<sup>12</sup> when measured against the yardstick of "objective description," the *ekphraseis* are usually found wanting. However, as the questions raised at the beginning of this article suggest, "objective description," although a useful working notion, is itself neither self-evident nor unproblematic. Even the most starkly informative guide-book description involves a drastic selection of details to be expressed in words.<sup>13</sup> Such an account may contain verifiable statements about material elements of the construction, specifying dimensions and orientation and using technical terminology, but much is still omitted. Any description necessitates the selection and ordering of details according to the rules of language.

In this sense one can argue that all descriptions, and not just those by Byzantine authors, are mirrors that must in some way "distort" their subjects. At the same time, by the very act of selecting, ordering, and presenting material they can act as a sort of commentary on their subjects. In order to see how these *ekphraseis* can be best used in relation to the monuments they describe, it is surely important to treat them first and foremost as texts with their own logic and organizing principles.<sup>14</sup> If we read them in this light, the distinction between those words and phrases that refer to the material appearance of the buildings and those (often dismissed as "rhetorical ornamentation") that refer to other, unseen, aspects becomes less important. A literary approach to *ekphrasis* can contribute to a study of aesthetics from two points of view. Most simply, it can tell us about

<sup>10</sup>Eusebios, *Historia ecclesiastica* 10.4; Chorikios, *Laudatio Marciani* 1 and 2, in *Choricii Gazaei opera*, ed. R. Foerster and E. Richtsteig (Leipzig, 1929); Photios, *Homiliai* 10; Leo the Wise, *Panygerikoi logoi*, ed. Akakios (Athens, 1868), 28, 34. Akakios's edition is difficult to find; partial translations are given by C. Mango, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire* (Toronto, 1986), 202–5, and A. Frolow, "Deux églises byzantines d'après des sermons peu connus de Léon VI le Sage," *EtByz* 3 (1945): 43–91.

<sup>11</sup>A. Muñoz, "Alcune fonte letterarie per la storia dell'arte bizantina," *NBACr* 10 (1904): 221–32, and idem, "Le ἐκφράσεις nella letteratura bizantina e i loro rapporti con l'arte figurata," in *Recueil d'études dédiées à la mémoire de N. P. Kondakov* (Prague, 1926), 139–42, was one of the first to suggest the use of Byzantine *ekphraseis* as a source for art history. Legrand (*Description des oeuvres*) and Friedländer (*Johannes von Gaza*) include diagrammatic reconstructions of the monuments described by Constantine and Paul, respectively.

<sup>12</sup>On the problems raised by the *ekphraseis* of the Holy Apostles, see particularly A. Epstein, "The Rebuilding and Redecoration of the Holy Apostles in Constantinople: A Reconsideration," *GRBS* 23 (1982): 79–92.

<sup>13</sup>See, for example, the account of the dome of Hagia Sophia in J. Freely, *Blue Guide: Istanbul* (London, 1997), 48: "The main support for the dome is provided by four enormous and irregularly shaped piers standing in a square approximately 31m on a side. From these piers rise four great arches, between which four pendentives make the transition from the square to the circular base of the dome. Upon the cornice of the circular base rests the slightly elliptical dome, of which the east-west diameter is about 31m and the north-south approximately 33m, with the crown soaring 56m above the floor . . ." R. Krautheimer, "Introduction to an 'Iconography' of Medieval Architecture," *JWarb* 5 (1942): 1–33, contrasts this modern conception of architecture with the interests of medieval (mainly Western) architects and patrons.

<sup>14</sup>Epstein, "Rebuilding and Redecoration," demonstrates the importance of an understanding of literary form to the assessment of the historical value of *ekphraseis*.

the textual aesthetics of description, the rhetorical strategies favored by authors in presenting their subject matter. But there is also a more complex dimension: these particular texts bear a certain relation to a material object and often to a particular occasion;<sup>15</sup> understanding their literary form can help to clarify that relationship and maybe point toward the aesthetics of the buildings themselves and their qualities, perhaps not always material or visible ones, that may have been perceived and appreciated. It is for this reason that I have chosen to treat these texts, which span a period of six centuries, in a single survey: all address the same basic problems of describing and share strategies of verbal representation.

#### TEXTS AND THEIR CONTEXTS

The historical relationship between the texts in question and their subjects is often fairly easy to identify, although each occupies a slightly different position within a complex set of factors such as patronage, occasion, and genre. Most were composed for a particular occasion and were originally recited in or close to the monuments they describe. Eusebios pronounced his panegyric within the church itself, while Paul the Silentiary's *ekphrasis* appears from the manuscript headings to have been recited in two different locations, the Imperial and Patriarchal palaces.<sup>16</sup> The audience were thus either familiar with the buildings or actually able to see them as they listened to the speaker, a paradox to which several authors refer.<sup>17</sup>

At the same time the authors also had to bear in mind possible later audiences. Choriokios distinguishes the audience in the church from the future readers who have never seen it but who may gain a vivid impression from his writings.<sup>18</sup> In the fourth century, Libanios's autobiography gives evidence for the circumstances in which an orator might give a repeat performance of his own work. The story concerns the unfortunate Bemarchios who presented an old speech of his celebrating Constantius's Great Church at Antioch. According to Libanios, the members of the audience were left glancing at each other in utter confusion as Bemarchios "rambled on about pillars, trellised courts, and intercrossing paths which came out heaven knows where."<sup>19</sup> Whether the failure was due to Bemarchios's poor rhetorical skills or can be ascribed to sheer ill will on the part of Libanios we shall never know; but the anecdote serves to remind us that these speeches in their original contexts had functions that went far beyond the merely informative or representational. This later performance was part of an ongoing professional rivalry between Bemarchios and Libanios. In Bemarchios's case, the nature of the audience and the occasion made all the difference to the reception of the speech—for, as Libanios tells us, Bemarchios had earlier made his fortune with the very same speech.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>15</sup>For a rich exploration of the relation between Paul the Silentiary's *ekphrasis* of Hagia Sophia and its historical context, see R. Macrides and P. Magdalino, "The Architecture of *Ekphrasis*: Construction and Context of Paul the Silentiary's Poem on Hagia Sophia," *BMGS* 12 (1988): 47–82.

<sup>16</sup>M. Whitby, "The Occasion of Paul the Silentiary's *Ekphrasis* of S. Sophia," *CQ* 35 (1985): 216–17.

<sup>17</sup>Chorikios, *Laudatio Marciani* 1.16.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup>Libanios, *Autobiography*, ed. and trans. A. F. Norman (Oxford, 1965), 41: διεξιόντος αὐτοῦ κίονας δὴ τινὰς καὶ κυκλίδας ὁδοὺς τε ὑπαλλήλων τεμονόμενας ἐμπιπτούσας οὐκ οἶδ' ὅποι. . . .

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, sections 39–41.

Such detailed, albeit partial, information about the context of a performance and the audience response is rare. For the most part we are limited to the authors' own accounts of the aims and problems of their enterprise. In several passages Chorikios discusses the limitations of verbal representation—the aspect of Bemarchios's speech that Libanios had singled out for ridicule. Speaking on the church of St. Sergios, Chorikios notes that his description can encompass only those elements of its subject that are suitable for rhetorical presentation, going on to remind his audience that a mere imitation (μίμησις) will always fall short of accuracy.<sup>21</sup> Leo the Wise, in his speech on the church of Stylianos Zaoutzas, discusses the challenge of describing a sight that his audience can see. In an elegant proemium he characterizes his enterprise as a reward to the artist, granted in exchange for the pleasure of the spectacle. The speech is therefore in some sense an equivalent to its subject, a monument in words.<sup>22</sup> Leo implies that one should consider his speech as a verbal artifact whose equivalence to its subject is not based solely on its representational function.

The same idea is present, in a more developed form, in Nikolaos Mesarites' *ekphrasis*. In the invocation to the apostles, which precedes his account of the interior of the Holy Apostles, the author makes explicit the metaphor of verbal monument. With a prayer for divine inspiration, he refers to his composition as a “building (οἶκον) which I have undertaken to construct (οικοδομήσαι) with the material of words and the skill of my intellect.” But then he goes on to define his work as much more than a simple verbal copy of the church: the speech, and the very process of composition, will allow both the author and every “lover of the apostles” to perceive the beauty of the church more acutely (τρανότερον) and purely (καθαρώτερον).<sup>23</sup> Mesarites thus proposes a dual function for his speech. It is a verbal equivalent, a carefully wrought work of art in its own right, but at the same time it can complement the material building, which is both a referent and a parallel. Indeed, it is far more than a static literary monument—rather, its composition and recitation are processes that involve and affect both the speaker and the audience.

Taken together, all these remarks suggest that the rhetor is able to construct in words an equivalent to the monument he is describing. The word has its own ways of working that are very different from those of the visual arts, and it may fall far short of its model in some respects, as Chorikios states, but it can also make its own contribution, as Mesarites suggests. Our authors are imprecise about the particular nature of their medium and its demands; but in many ways the tradition of *ekphrasis* within which they were working suggested ways of creating a verbal equivalent to a subject that fully exploited the characteristics of the verbal medium, such as its temporal dimension and its ability to evoke that which is absent as vividly as that which is present. The theory and practice of *ekphrasis*

<sup>21</sup> Chorikios, *Laudatio Marciani* 1.9, 1.16: πᾶσα δὲ μίμησις ἦττον πως φέρεται τῆς ἀκριβείας. These words are repeated verbatim by Ioannes Phokas in the introduction to his *ekphrasis* of the Holy Land; PG 133:928B.

<sup>22</sup> Leo the Wise, *Homily* 34, ed. Akakios (as above, note 10), 274–75.

<sup>23</sup> Mesarites, *Ekphrasis* 12.4: εἰ γὰρ μὴ κύριος δι' ὑμῶν οἰκοδομήσει μοι οἶκον τοῦτον, ὃν ταῖς ἐκ λόγου ὕλαις καὶ τοῖς ἐκ νοῦς τεχνουργήμασιν οἰκοδομήσαι προϋθέμην, ἵν' ἔχοιμι δι' αὐτοῦ καὶ γὰρ καὶ πᾶς φιλαπόστολος πρὸς τὸ τοῦ ὑμετέρου οἴκου κάλλος τρανότερόν τε καὶ καθαρώτερον ἑνωρᾶν, εἰς μάτην οἱ οἰκοδομοῦντες ἀνθρώπινοί μοι λογισμοὶ καὶ λόγοι κεκοπιάκασιν.

had always allowed for the possibilities and limitations of the verbal medium in ways that were developed by Byzantine authors.

#### ANCIENT AND BYZANTINE THEORIES OF DESCRIPTION

The aim of *ekphrasis* in rhetoric had always been less to give a complete and accurate account of a particular object than to convey the effect that the perception of that object worked upon the viewer. The speaker aimed first and foremost to appeal to the listener's imagination, often through the use of generalized images that were more likely to correspond to the prior experience of the audience, rather than to provide an accurate verbal transcription of a particular object. Vivid language seems to have been thought to evoke the effect of perception upon the listener, to make him or her feel "as if" in the presence of the scene.<sup>24</sup> Implicit in the classical conception of *ekphrasis* is, therefore, an emphasis on the use of language to represent not merely the sensible appearance of the subject, but its more general, intelligible characteristics. This is an aspect of *ekphrasis* that Byzantine authors exploited in their descriptions of church buildings, among other things.

The strict modern distinction between description (understood as the representation of static objects) and narration (the representation of actions or events) was not observed. In ancient rhetoric, *ekphrasis* fell somewhere between these two categories, and was often a vivid and detailed narration of events. An *ekphrasis* is by definition an account of anything—from a battle to a person to a season—that has the quality of vividness (ἐνάργεια) necessary to make an audience "see." Unlike description in modern theories of narration, *ekphrasis* was not defined as an interruption to the temporal flow of a surrounding narrative, but usually incorporated some temporal progression itself. This is apparent from the instructions for *ekphraseis* of battles in the *Progymnasmata*, which recommend a progression from the events that preceded the battle to the battle itself and finally to its aftermath.<sup>25</sup> There are indications that the animation of a scene was felt to contribute to its vividness.<sup>26</sup> *Ekphraseis* of works of art show a tendency to ignore the static, spatial nature of the painting or mosaic, and to recount the events depicted as if they were unfolding in time, while imbuing the scene with human interest by expressing the describer's emotional involvement.<sup>27</sup> But while a painting can easily be turned into narrative—a verbal equivalent that tells the same story in a different medium—a building or a place posed different problems.

There are no explicit comments in ancient treatises or Byzantine commentaries on how to deal with such subject matter. All the authors of *progymnasmata* mention "places" as a category of subject matter for *ekphrasis*, but as Ruth Macrides and Paul Magdalino

<sup>24</sup>See R. Webb, "Mémoire et imagination: Les limites de l'*enargeia* dans la théorie rhétorique grecque," in *Dire l'évidence*, ed. C. Lévy and L. Pernot (Paris, 1997), 229–48.

<sup>25</sup>Hermogenes, *Progymnasmata*, in *Hermogenis opera*, ed. H. Rabe (Leipzig, 1913), 22–23; Aphthonios, *Progymnasmata*, ed. H. Rabe (Leipzig, 1926), 37.

<sup>26</sup>Aristotle supposes a connection between animation of the subject matter and vividness of the language in his enigmatic remarks on metaphor, *Rhetoric*, 1411b.24–25; see G. Morpurgo-Tagliabue, *Linguistica e stilistica de Aristotele* (Rome, 1967), 256–66. Ioannes Sardonios conversely describes *enargeia* as the quality that lends animation to speech, making it as if alive (ἐμπνους), in his *Commentarium in Aphthonii Progymnasmata*, ed. H. Rabe (Leipzig, 1928), 217, 1.3.

<sup>27</sup>L. James and R. Webb, "'To Understand Ultimate Things and Enter Secret Places': Ekphrasis and Art in Byzantium," *Art History* 14 (1991): 1–17.

note in their study of Paul the Silentiary, none gives any specific instructions.<sup>28</sup> Despite Photios's reference to the "canons" of *ekphrasis*, there are no rules comparable in detail to those for the full-scale epideictic speeches. However, the very definition of *ekphrasis* contains a valuable indication: most of the ancient rhetoricians agree in calling it a λόγος περιηγηματικός, literally a speech that "leads one around."<sup>29</sup> The glosses on this term in Ioannes Sardianos's commentary to Aphthonios show that the literal meaning was still active: it is as if, he explains, one were to show a new arrival around the city of Athens, adding that the metaphorical meaning is "to recount in order" (ἐξῆς).<sup>30</sup>

By this means the orator could turn an account of a static object into an account of a journey, representing space through the passage of time.<sup>31</sup> The *periegesis* format is thus a convenient way of ordering details, and one that adapts the representation of space to the demands of the temporal flow of language. Indeed, the metaphor of language as journey is well established in the Greek language in terms such as διηγέομαι or περίοδος. A further advantage is the introduction of movement into the presentation of an otherwise static subject, which dramatizes and personalizes the description by suggesting a viewer whose responses may be noted and commented upon. The role of metaphorical guide adopted by speakers also contributes to the construction of a relationship between the speaker and the audience. This is most notable in Chorikios, who changes abruptly from the second person plural of his introduction to the more intimate singular form as he begins his *periegesis* of the church of St. Sergios, and in Mesarites, who frequently exhorts his audience to follow him or to direct their gaze toward certain elements of the decoration during his imaginary tour of the Holy Apostles.

In adopting the *periegesis* as an organizing principle for their descriptions, authors such as Chorikios and Mesarites were following the standard procedure for *ekphraseis* of places. Such *ekphraseis* were a regular part of city encomia in the Roman Empire, the most detailed being Libanios's *Antiochikos*.<sup>32</sup> Aristides similarly takes his audience on an imaginary tour of Smyrna, traversing the city from west to east, then moving up onto the acropolis and down again.<sup>33</sup> But when he wishes to create an impression of the whole rather than the parts, Aristides uses a different method. In order to convey the beauty of Smyrna he compares the city to shining pearls and a splendid many-colored cloak.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, in his oration on Kyzikos, the size and splendor of the temple were evoked for the citizens through hyperbolic comparisons: the blocks of stone are said to be as large as temples, the temple as large as a sanctuary, the sanctuary as large as a city.<sup>35</sup> The principle underlying such comparisons is very different from that of the *periegesis*, though

<sup>28</sup> Macrides and Magdalino, "Architecture of *Ekphrasis*," 48–49.

<sup>29</sup> Hermogenes, *Progymnasmata*, 22.7, and Aphthonios, *Progymnasmata*, 36.21.

<sup>30</sup> Sardianos, *Commentarium*, 216.

<sup>31</sup> See James and Webb, "To Understand Ultimate Things," 8; for a more detailed study of the *periegesis* in late classical literature and its connection with *enargeia*, see S. Dubel, "*Ekphrasis et enargeia*: La description antique comme parcours," in *Dire l'évidence*, 249–64. Michael the Deacon uses the verb περιηγέομαι to refer to his description in the passage quoted above, note 1.

<sup>32</sup> On the development of *ekphrasis* within city encomia, see H. Saradi, "The *Kallos* of the Byzantine City: The Development of a Rhetorical *Topos* and Historical Reality," *Gesta* 34 (1995): 37–56.

<sup>33</sup> Aelius Aristides, *Oration 17*, in *Opera*, ed. Keil (as above, note 3), 2:3–4.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:4.2, 4.8–9.

<sup>35</sup> Aelius Aristides, *Oration 27*, in *Opera*, ed. Keil, 2:129–30.

the final aim is the same—vividness, or ἐνάργεια. While the *periegesis* is a way of organizing references to the visible features of the subject, the recourse to simile introduces a new dimension by comparing the present sight (often visible to the original audience) to some other, absent entity. The dual function suggested by Mesarites in his speech was already implicit in the classical theory and practice of *ekphrasis*. Along with the *periegesis*, the constant reference to the unseen is adopted by Byzantine authors, but invested with a new significance.

Chorikios's speeches were still very much part of this late classical tradition, but later authors too were clearly aware of these earlier models, both Christian and pre-Christian. Mesarites, for example, signals his consciousness of the tradition of *ekphrasis*, and of his own place within it, through his use of Libanios's *Antiochikos* in the early sections of his *Ekphrasis*.<sup>36</sup> The generalized terms in which Libanios couched his description made it easy to adapt his phrases to the suburban setting of the Constantinopolitan church. But such models were of only limited use to authors of church *ekphraseis*, and it is notable that Mesarites confines his use of the *Antiochikos* to the introductory sections of his work in which the church is placed in its urban context. A building like the Holy Apostles involved an entirely new challenge connected with its function and architecture, requiring an extended rhetorical account of a sacred interior. For this there were no direct classical precedents: descriptions of temples like that in Aristeides' oration on Kyzikos focused on the exterior of the building presented within its civic or ritual context.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, the churches were visually rich in their architectural form and surface decoration as well as complex in terms of their symbolic function.<sup>38</sup> As the Greek hymn on the church of Hagia Sophia in Edessa proclaims, the very idea of the church as a house of the uncircumscribable divinity is equal in its paradox to the incarnation itself.<sup>39</sup> The earliest extant church *ekphrasis*, Eusebios's *Panegyric on the Church at Tyre*, insists on this symbolic function, treating the church first as a building but then as a symbol of the living temple.<sup>40</sup> For Eusebios, the very existence of Paulinos's building at Tyre was tangible proof of the triumph of Christianity. Similarly, Hagia Sophia and the Holy Apostles also stood as signs of imperial power and patronage, themes that are particularly evident in Paul the Silentary,<sup>41</sup> Prokopios, and Constantine Rhodios. Thus, in addition to the problems of describing, the authors of church *ekphraseis* encountered the challenge of evoking sites replete with meaning. To do so they adopted and adapted traditional strategies like the *periegesis*.

#### PERIEGESIS

The *periegesis* format is the most frequently used method of organizing an account of the building. It may begin with some mention of the building's location within the city, as in Mesarites and Chorikios; but, in contrast to the classical precedents, the exterior is

<sup>36</sup>For a full list of references, see Downey's commentary to Mesarites, *Ekphrasis*, 862.

<sup>37</sup>On the evidence for speakers performing in front of temples, see L. Pernot, *La rhétorique de l'éloge dans le monde gréco-romain* (Paris, 1994), 441.

<sup>38</sup>Pseudo-Germanos, *Historia ecclesiastica*, PG 98:384A–453B, enumerates the symbolism of the church building, furniture, and vestments.

<sup>39</sup>A. Palmer, "The Inauguration Anthem of Hagia Sophia in Edessa," *BMGS* 12 (1988): 117–67.

<sup>40</sup>See Macrides and Magdalino, "Architecture of *Ekphrasis*," 52.

<sup>41</sup>On Paul, see Macrides and Magdalino, "Architecture of *Ekphrasis*."



by no means the main focus of attention. Some authors, moreover, go far beyond the simple use of the *periegesis* as an organizing principle for their descriptions and develop the metaphor of the text itself, or the process of composition, as a journey. This tendency is evident, for example, in Photios's reference to the "progress of my speech" (ὁ τοῦ λόγου δρόμος).<sup>42</sup> The most elaborate conceit is found in Mesarites' use of the term *logos*. Here the speech is not just a journey, but is personified and described as if it were itself the imaginary visitor to the church: the personified *logos* takes on the emotions appropriate to the various sights described, it runs away from the author, addresses the women at the tomb of its own accord, looks about curiously, and notices details by itself.<sup>43</sup> In these passages Mesarites fully exploits the polyvalence of the term: word, speech, discourse, thought, and, of course, the divine *Logos*.<sup>44</sup>

The old metaphor is thus endowed with a new significance by Mesarites. Other authors manipulate the notion of the *periegesis* in different ways in order to express the nature of their subjects. Rather than following an unproblematic linear progression (as in Aristeides, for example), they frequently express difficulty, the threat of interruption, or the need to retrace their figurative steps. This may be used as a way of expressing the magnificence of the spectacle, as when Chorikios claims that the variegated splendor of the exterior of the church of St. Stephen may prevent the visitor from entering it.<sup>45</sup> The *topos* is developed by Photios, who says that the beauty of the atrium of the church of the Virgin of the Pharos will cause the visitor to be rooted to the spot, even to be transformed into a tree in his amazement (θαῦμα).<sup>46</sup> The primary function of these hyperbolic statements is evidently to express the beauty of the building and its effect upon the listener; as such they are a variation on the standard expression of *aporia* by the speaker who claims that "words cannot describe the sight."

A similar effect is to be found in Constantine Rhodios's *ekphrasis*. He begins to mention the figural decoration of the Holy Apostles only to remind himself that this is not the right moment (καιρός); he then breaks off to describe the construction of the building first.<sup>47</sup> Here the passage echoes a long-established literary *topos*, creating the impression that the poem is an improvised performance that might develop in any of several different ways, rather than a carefully planned composition. At the same time one could argue that these artful impressions of disarray are also wholly appropriate to the subject matter of the *ekphraseis*. A centrally planned church, like the Holy Apostles, in reality imposes no simple itinerary upon the visitor. The way in which Constantine evokes the decoration, only to return to the architecture, is an acknowledgment both of the variety of spectacle offered by the church and of the fact that the author must impose his own order upon this material. Such hesitation is perhaps the closest an author can get to rendering the simultaneity of visual experience, which would otherwise exhaust and surpass the possibilities of speech.

<sup>42</sup>Photios, *Homiliai* 10.7. For this conceit in the earlier literature, see Dubel, "Ekphrasis et enargeia."

<sup>43</sup>Mesarites, *Ekphrasis* 28.

<sup>44</sup>On *logos* in Mesarites, see T. Baseu-Barabas, *Zwischen Wort und Bild: Nikolaos Mesarites und seine Beschreibung des Mosaikschmucks der Apostelkirche in Konstantinopel* (Vienna, 1992), 126–42.

<sup>45</sup>Chorikios, *Laudatio Marciani* 2.21.

<sup>46</sup>Photios, *Homiliai* 10.4.

<sup>47</sup>Constantine Rhodios, *Ekphrasis*, ll. 534–40: ἀλλ' ἀμφὶ τῶνδε θαυμάτων καὶ πραγμάτων/τὰ νῦν σιγᾶσθω τάξεως χάριν λόγος / καιροῦ δ' ἐποτρύνοντος ἔμπαλιν φράσω, / Θεοῦ θέλοντος καὶ λόγον δωρουμένου.

The imagined obstacles to entering the buildings evoked by Chorikios and Photios also serve to focus attention on the moment of transition between the exterior and the interior. The crossing of the threshold into the church interior is a dramatic moment in the journey. Paul the Silentiary, for example, begins his account of Hagia Sophia by imagining that he and his audience (who seem to have been in the Patriarchal Palace) are knocking at the doors of the church and requesting entrance.<sup>48</sup> Mesarites uses a change in the register of his language to underline the point, ceasing to use classical quotations and citing the Gospels instead. Chorikios dramatizes the moment for his audience, claiming that the variety of things to see within the church will make them dizzy as they look around them.<sup>49</sup> Once again, Chorikios's idea is developed by Photios in his tenth homily:

But when, having torn oneself away from the atrium, one looks into the church itself, with how much joy and trembling and astonishment is one filled! It is as if one were stepping into heaven itself with no one standing in the way at any point; one is illuminated and struck by the various beauties that shine forth like stars all around. Then everything else seems to be in ecstasy and the church itself seems to whirl around; for the viewer, with his twistings and turnings in every direction and his constant movements that the variety of the spectacle imposes on him, imagines that his personal experience is transferred to the church.<sup>50</sup>

In contrast to the exterior, the interior poses no obstacle to the viewer, offering instead almost (ὥς) a vision of heaven itself. What is more, the intensity of aesthetic experience inside the church is such that normal modes of perception and normal distinctions between subject and object are said to be disrupted. This is suggested by Photios's explicit statements about the effect of the church interior on the viewer's senses, but it may also be implicit in the type of language used to evoke the appearance of the buildings.

#### METAPHOR AND TRANSCENDENCE

A monument like a church might seem to be the very model of the static and the solid; yet architectural features, particularly the curves of arches and vaults, are frequently described in *ekphraseis* as if their forms were traced not in static stone, but by a point in motion. In Paul the Silentiary's account of Hagia Sophia the four arches between the four central piers are each said to "rise up little by little on well-curved airy paths" and thus to "separate from their former partner."<sup>51</sup> Elsewhere, columns are said to dance, arches to grow up, and conches to spring forth.<sup>52</sup> Some of these terms may well be "dead metaphors," but the frequency and variety of their use invite us to look further.

<sup>48</sup> Paul the Silentiary, *Ekphrasis*, ll. 350–52: οἷζατέ μοι κληῖδα θεουδέες, οἷζατε μύσται, / οἷζατε δ' ἡμετέροισιν ἀνάκτορα θέσκελα μύθοις.

<sup>49</sup> Chorikios, *Laudatio Marciani* 1.23.

<sup>50</sup> Photios, *Homiliai* 10.5: ἐπειδὴν δέ τις ἐκεῖθεν μόλις ἀποσπασθεὶς εἰς αὐτὸ παρακύψῃ τὸ τέμενος, ἡλίκης καὶ ὅσης οὗτος χαρὰς τε ἅμα καὶ ταραχῆς καὶ θάμβους ἐμπίπταται. ὥς εἰς αὐτὸν γὰρ τὸν οὐρανὸν μηδενὸς ἐπιπροσθοῦντος μηδαμῶθεν ἐμβεβηκῶς καὶ τοῖς πολυμόρφοις καὶ πανταχόθεν ὑποφαινομένοις κάλλεσιν ὥς ἄστροις περιλαμπόμενος ὅλος ἐκπεπληγμένος γίνεται. δοκεῖ δὲ λοιπὸν ἐντεῦθεν τὰ τε ἄλλα ἐν ἐκστάσει εἶναι καὶ αὐτὸ περιδινεῖσθαι τὸ τέμενος· ταῖς γὰρ οἰκείαις καὶ παντοδαπαῖς περιστροφαῖς καὶ συνεχέσι κινήσεσιν, ἃ πάντως παθεῖν τὸν θεατὴν ἢ πανταχόθεν ποικιλία βιάζεται τοῦ θεάματος, εἰς αὐτὸ τὸ ὁρώμενον τὸ οἰκεῖον φαντάζεται πάθος.

<sup>51</sup> Paul the Silentiary, *Ekphrasis*, ll. 463–65: ὀρνυμένη δὲ/ἡερίαις κατὰ βαιὸν ἐνγνάμπτοισι κελεύθοις/τῆς πρὶν ὁμογνήτοιο δίσταται.

<sup>52</sup> See, for example, Paul the Silentiary, *Ekphrasis*, ll. 400, 405; Michael the Deacon, *Ekphrasis* 4.105.

The rhetorical motivation is clear: the attribution of movement and animation to a static entity was one means of making the subject vivid for the listener. This mode of describing also reflects the experience of the building. The movement attributed to the architectural features may also be a means of suggesting the actual experience of the visitor who is moving around the church and for whom the architecture is an intricate and ever-changing pattern of forms.<sup>53</sup> At the same time this rhetorical technique was also an effective way of expressing the magnificence and otherness of the church. Michael the Deacon argues that the perception of static elements as being in motion is part of the viewer's experience of Hagia Sophia and that this is the impression created by the physical nature of the building itself. The brightness of the gold in the narthex, he says, makes it almost appear to drip down (καταστάζειν).<sup>54</sup> Like Photios, Michael offers a physiological explanation: the light reflected back by the gold affects the moisture of the eyes and creates this effect. The building is such that it transcends its material nature and cannot be perceived as an object.

These examples show how rhetorical techniques may in fact contribute to the depiction of the church interior as a sight that transcends normal human experience, and may serve to reveal rather than conceal. Mesarites is the most explicit of the authors on this point. At the threshold of the Holy Apostles, the point of transition, he explains that the eyes of the senses (οἱ αἰσθητοὶ ὀφθαλμοί) must be supplemented by the eyes of the mind (οἱ νοεροὶ ὀφθαλμοί) in a progression, not just from the exterior to the interior of the church, but from the evidence of the senses to the final mysteries and secret places.<sup>55</sup> There is thus a further sense in which the text represents a journey. The listeners are not only taken on a *periegesis* around the physical building, but also receive the spiritual understanding necessary to lift their perception from the material to the spiritual. Seen in this light, the remarks of Photios and Chorikios on the danger of being distracted by the appearance of the exterior and thus failing to reach the glories of the interior take on a new significance. In Eusebios, the mere appearance of the church at Tyre, in contrast to its symbolic significance, is termed "the external impression" (ἡ ἔξωθεν φαντασία).<sup>56</sup> The external appearance inspires wonder (θαῦμα) in the viewer, but the archetypes and their prototypes to which it points—the spiritual renewal of which the building is just a sign—are more wondrous still. For these authors, then, to restrict one's attention to the objective, material, aspects of the building is to fail to enter it.

One way of leading the soul upward, of revealing the mysteries of the building, seems to have been by making explicit the significance of the architectural form. None of the *ekphraseis* provides anything like the systematic discussion of the elements of church architecture and of their significance that is to be found in the *Historia ecclesiastica* attributed

<sup>53</sup>I am grateful to Robert Ousterhout for this suggestion. See also the remarks of O. Wulff, "Das Raumerlebnis des Naos im Spiegel der Ekphrasis," *BZ* 30 (1929–30): 531.

<sup>54</sup>Michael the Deacon, *Ekphrasis* 3.

<sup>55</sup>Mesarites, *Ekphrasis* 12.1: ἤδη δὲ καιρὸς ἡμᾶς προχωρῆσαι τῷ λόγῳ καὶ τὰ ἐνδοθεν τοῦ ναοῦ καὶ κατοπεῦσαι μὲν ταῦτα τοῖς αἰσθητοῖς ὀφθαλμοῖς, κατανοῆσαι δὲ καὶ τοῖς νοεροῖς. οἶδε γὰρ καὶ νοῦς προκόπτειν ἐκ τῶν κατ' αἴσθησιν καὶ τοῦ ἐλάττονος ποδηγούμενος καταλαμβάνειν τὰ τελεώτερα καὶ πρὸς τὰ ἄδυνα παρειαδύνειν. . . .

<sup>56</sup>Eusebios, *Historia ecclesiastica* 10.4.55: θαῦμα μὲν οὖν μέγιστον τοῦτο καὶ πέρα πάσης ἐκπλήξεως, μάλιστα τοῖς ἐπὶ μόνῃ τῇ τῶν ἔξωθεν φαντασίᾳ τὸν νοῦν προσανέχουσιν· θαυμάτων δὲ θαυμασιώτερα τὰ τε ἀρχέτυπα καὶ τούτων τὰ πρωτότυπα νοητὰ καὶ θεοπρεπῆ παραδείγματα, τὰ τῆς ἐνθέου φημι καὶ λογικῆς ἐν ψυχαῖς οἰκοδομῆς ἀναεώματα.

to Germanos. Rather, the statements about the symbolism of the building tend to be general in nature, like Photios's comparison of the interior of the church of the Virgin of the Pharos to heaven itself. Constantine Rhodios notes the significance of the cross-shaped plan of the Holy Apostles, points out the numerical significance of the number of columns, and, like Mesarites, compares the dome, with its depiction of the Pantokrator, to heaven in a common simile.<sup>57</sup>

The most striking presentation of the architectural form is to be found in the text of Michael the Deacon. He offers the most unusual reading of the architecture of Hagia Sophia, using the image of pregnancy to express the form, size, and significance of the building as a whole: "The building opens up to immensity (ὡς εἰς τὸ ἀχανές); the breadth of its hollows is such that it could be pregnant with many thousands of bodies."<sup>58</sup> The image creates a powerful visual impression of the volume and the rounded forms of the building, at the same time pointing to its theological significance. The idea of pregnancy recalls the comparison of the Virgin to the living church (ναὸς ἔμψυχος) as well as the parallel between the church and Theotokos, both receptacles for the boundless divinity.<sup>59</sup> Such is the size, in fact, that the very notion of the interior is now surpassed and abolished in Michael's *ekphrasis*; the very forms that close around the viewer are said to open up to immensity.

The authors thus use the medium of language to refer to those aspects of the buildings that are not immediately visible but are implicit in the structures. Another type of meaning brought out by these texts can be seen in the narratives of past events, which in various ways seem "built into" the church buildings and which the authors of *ekphraseis* retell in words.

#### NARRATIVES

One type of past event made present through the description is the building's construction, with the narrative telling how each element of the church was put in place.<sup>60</sup> Naturally, the greatest emphasis on construction is to be found in the texts celebrating Justinian's rebuilding of Hagia Sophia. The second half of Prokopios's account of the church describes its architecture in terms of the rebuilding and Justinian's divinely inspired role in this.<sup>61</sup> Paul the Silentiary's *ekphrasis* of Hagia Sophia has the most elaborate narrative framework of any of the texts in the iambic side panels that tell in epic fashion how Roma spurred Justinian to action.<sup>62</sup> Paul's description of the church is mainly in the *periegesis* form, but he is also careful to describe its precious marbles in terms of their origin, reminding his audience of the laborious process by which they were mined and

<sup>57</sup>Constantine Rhodios, *Ekphrasis*, ll. 462–71, 718–22, 501, respectively; Mesarites, *Ekphrasis* 13.5. On number symbolism, see P. Magdalino, "Observations on the Nea Ekklesia of Basil I," *JÖB* 37 (1987): 56–57.

<sup>58</sup>Michael the Deacon, *Ekphrasis* 4.88–90: ὡς εἰς τὸ ἀχανές ὁ οἶκος ἀνέωγε, κύτους μὲν εὐρύτητα ἔχων ὡς πολλὰς ἂν σωμάτων μυριάδας ἐγκυμονεῖν.

<sup>59</sup>J. Meyendorff, "Wisdom-Sophia: Contrasting Approaches to a Complex Theme," *DOP* 41 (1987): 391–401, and Palmer, "Inauguration Anthem," 148.

<sup>60</sup>The technique goes back to Homer's account of Hephaistos making the Shield of Achilles in *Iliad* 18, a description praised by G. E. Lessing in his *Laokoon* (1766) precisely because it respected the nature of poetry by presenting the material in narrative form.

<sup>61</sup>Prokopios, *Buildings* 1.1.70–71.

<sup>62</sup>M. Whitby, "Paul the Silentiary and Claudian," *CQ* 35 (1985): 507–16.

brought to Constantinople.<sup>63</sup> Implicit in the columns is a narrative of their origin and, above all, of the action of Justinian who is credited with gathering their splendor together; the very presence of the columns in the church is treated as proof of the extent of his domain. Constantine Rhodios, whose work is dedicated to an emperor, similarly insists on the various origins of the stones in the Holy Apostles, treating their presence as proof of their past journey to Constantinople.<sup>64</sup> In these brief accounts of stones, the authors evoke in words the narratives implicit in the objects themselves.

In the case of the *ekphraseis* of the Holy Apostles, the description of figural decoration introduces a further layer of narrative complexity. When Constantine Rhodios finally allows himself to treat the figural decoration, he does so in a plain list form. On the other hand, Mesarites' presentation of the images in the Holy Apostles is far more sophisticated in its interweaving of time and space, the events depicted, and their architectural framework. Mesarites speaks as if he were moving around the church from scene to scene, but the order he follows is dictated by the relationship between the scenes (not necessarily a chronological one) and not, as far as it is possible to tell from the lacunary text, by their architectural setting.<sup>65</sup>

The image of the Transfiguration, for example, is described just before that of the Crucifixion. After dwelling upon the significance of the events on Mount Tabor, Mesarites asks his audience to follow him from one scene to the next with these words: "But Him, whose glory the disciples saw just now as He was transfigured on Tabor and whose end, which He was going to fulfill in Jerusalem, the chiefs of the prophets spoke of, going on a little further in our speech let us see Him hanging on the cross in the eastern hall, fulfilling willingly in Golgotha the end, which was shortly before spoken of on Tabor by the prophets . . ."<sup>66</sup> The relative pronouns make awkward reading, but they serve to illustrate the intimate connections between the two events and their depictions. As Mesarites moves between the two images in his *periegesis* he also moves in time from one event to the next; as he does so, the narrative of the life of Christ is replayed within the framework of a fictional movement through space. The images bring the events of the past dramatically into the present for both the speaker and the audience. But Mesarites' verbal presentation also underlines the relationship between the two scenes, the relationship that transcends any normal temporal order. The Crucifixion is both cause and effect of the events on Mount Tabor. Using his material—the word—Mesarites is able not only to evoke the scenes depicted in the church but also to make explicit the theological connections between them.

The images therefore introduce a further narrative complexity into these texts. On a purely literary level, one might suggest that the multiple layers of time evoked by these texts—the fictional time of the *periegesis* and the past times of the events evoked—could

<sup>63</sup> Paul the Silentiary, *Ekphrasis*, ll. 376–80, 617–46. Paul naturally omits to mention that some of the columns were taken from earlier buildings.

<sup>64</sup> L. James, *Light and Colour in Byzantine Art* (Oxford, 1996), 115.

<sup>65</sup> See Epstein, "Rebuilding and Redecoration," 84–85.

<sup>66</sup> Mesarites, *Ekphrasis* 17.1: ἀλλὰ γὰρ οὐ τὴν δόξαν εἶδον οἱ μαθηταὶ ἐν τῷ παρόντι μεταμορφουμένου Θαβὼρ καὶ οὐ τὴν ἔξοδον συνελάλουν, ἣν ἔμελλε πληροῦν ἐν Ἱερουσαλὴμ, οἱ τῶν προφητῶν προὔχοντες, τοῦτον τῷ λόγῳ μεταβάλλοντες μικρὸν κατίδωμεν κρεμάμενον ἐν σταυρῷ ἐν τῇ περὶ τὴν ἑω στοᾷ, πληροῦντα μὲν ἐκουσίως ἐν Γολγοθᾷ τὴν ἐν Θαβὼρ πρὸ μικροῦ παρὰ τῶν προφητῶν συλλαλουμένην ἔξοδον. . . . Translation adapted from Downey's edition (p. 873).

be seen as a verbal, temporal equivalent of the spatial three-dimensionality of the building itself. In this way, literary structure echoes, on its own terms, the architectural structure.<sup>67</sup> But the presentation of images in the *ekphrasis* also serves to bring out the latent significance of the building, illustrating the role of images in making the past present as well as the narrative resonance between the images themselves. A narrative framework in the form of the *periegesis* clearly provided a valuable organizing principle for describing the interior of a building, allowing space to be represented in terms of an ordered progression unfolding in time. The subsidiary narratives, whether of the events depicted within the church or of the process by which the building came to be constructed in the past, performed a somewhat different function in relation to the building, unlocking layers of significance implicit in the structures and illustrating how these buildings might conquer time itself.<sup>68</sup> The interiors of the buildings are treated as microcosms in which ordinary time, as well as ordinary modes of perception, is surpassed and the past is made eternally present through images, through the structure itself, or through tangible signs of empire. That this was indeed how a church interior might have been conceived has been argued by Robert Ousterhout, on the basis of material remains. He concludes that the spatial arrangement of images in a church interior “serves to create a ritual space in which past, present, and future converge.”<sup>69</sup> The causal and theological resonances that Mesarites brings out in his account of the Transfiguration and Crucifixion scenes in the Holy Apostles must surely reflect the ways in which those images were experienced.

#### CONCLUSIONS

The interwoven narratives in this final example illustrate the extent to which the characteristics of the word, notably its temporal progression and its ability to express the implicit, are exploited by the authors in describing their subjects. In this article I have brought out some of the literary aspects of these texts—their structure, their manipulation of the traditional *periegesis*, or the introduction of different levels of narrative into the framing narrative of the tour around the church, as in Mesarites’ particularly complex presentation of the Holy Apostles. I hope to have suggested that these *ekphraseis* are worthy of analysis as texts in their own right. However, in the past it has always been the relation of the *ekphraseis* to their referents that has provoked the most interest, and this is a question that cannot be ignored. In the introduction I discussed some of the problems involved in the enterprise of description. A different type of relationship between text and referent, suggested by the authors themselves, is that of equivalence: an artfully constructed piece of poetry or prose constitutes a fitting response to the artistry of the building. This function of equivalence is in itself an encouragement to focus on the intrinsic qualities of the texts.

One aspect of the texts to which the authors draw attention, and which must be important for our assessment of their relation to the monuments they describe, is the process of composition. A further function of the frequent expressions of *aporia* is to call

<sup>67</sup>Macrides and Magdalino, “Architecture of *Ekphrasis*,” 58–59, suggest that the structure of Paul’s *Ekphrasis* might reflect the process of construction.

<sup>68</sup>Michael the Deacon, *Ekphrasis* 1.

<sup>69</sup>R. Ousterhout, “Temporal Structuring in the Chora Parekklesion,” *Gesta* 34 (1995): 76.

attention to the author's art, his role in creating the order of his composition, as well as to the divine aid that makes this possible. Mesarites' *ekphrasis* contains the clearest and most developed references to the role of the author. Breaking off after his account of the depiction of the Baptism in the Holy Apostles, he goes on to develop an extended metaphor that creates an analogy between the subject of the image and the act of composition: his pen is an oar, and the ink is the river Jordan into which the author has fallen.<sup>70</sup> This striking metaphor effectively expresses the speaker's involvement in the scene that he is placing before the eyes of his audience.<sup>71</sup> At the same time, paradoxically, this unexpected reference to the tools of the author's trade serves to disrupt the illusion—carefully built up by Mesarites' words—that the speaker is composing his speech within the church as his audience listens in. Here he reveals that at the moment of composition the author is faced only with his pen and ink and is presumably evoking the scenes in memory.

Although Mesarites is the only author making explicit reference to the material conditions of his task, this is an aspect that needs to be taken into consideration for all the texts when assessing their relation to their referents. These are not transcriptions of tours, or, as far as we can tell, spontaneous utterances. The authors clearly wrote from autopsy and deep familiarity with the monuments; but at the moment of composition they were, presumably, describing an intangible, mental image impressed in their memories. Mesarites, again, makes this most clear in his invocation to St. Bartholomew, in which he prays for his mind (*νοῦς*) to remain attached, as if crucified, to the church. The image of the church that he seeks to convey through his written discourse derives therefore primarily from the intellect and only secondarily from the material fabric of the church.

The hints that Mesarites gives us about the composition process of his *ekphrasis* suggest both the limitations of these texts and what they can reveal about their subjects. The *ekphraseis* can tell us about the observable aesthetic qualities that were appreciated by the Byzantines. The attention paid to the effects of light and variegated color, for example, has been shown to reflect wider aesthetic theories.<sup>72</sup> But the *ekphraseis* have more to tell; if language in the end falls short of a sight as marvelous as a church, it can still be used to state and comment on the qualities of the buildings that are not visible to the eye, as Mesarites again points out.<sup>73</sup> The most striking feature of these *ekphraseis* is the exploitation of the capacity of the word to evoke the absent, to express the intelligible meanings implicit in the material sights. If we treat the *ekphraseis* as texts, the distinction between the passages that refer to the tangible aspects of the building and those that refer to the intangible disappears. The fact that this lack of distinction was an important feature of the Byzantine conception of the "aesthetic" is suggested by the extension of the term *αἰσθητικός* in later Greek to include the intelligible in addition to the sensible.<sup>74</sup> By constantly juxtaposing the intelligible and the sensible these *ekphraseis* unlock the inherent significance of the buildings they describe.

<sup>70</sup> Mesarites, *Ekphrasis* 25.1. Compare with the invocation to St. Bartholomew (*ibid.*, 12.18) with its reference to "pen and ink."

<sup>71</sup> Epstein, "Rebuilding and Redecoration," 84, notes Mesarites' characteristic involvement in his subject.

<sup>72</sup> James, *Light and Colour*.

<sup>73</sup> Mesarites, *Ekphrasis* 12.1, 12.18.

<sup>74</sup> G. Lampe, *Patristic Greek Lexicon* (Oxford, 1961), s.v. *αἰσθητικός* D.

The rendering of space through time and the appeal to the invisible in order to express the visible are two techniques that Byzantine authors inherited from antiquity and developed far beyond their antique models. They are techniques that exploit the characteristics of language and are well suited to their subjects, allowing the authors to unlock the significance that was hidden, more or less deeply, within the buildings. In such an enterprise the distinction between the perceptible and the imperceptible qualities of the buildings becomes unimportant. By juxtaposing the two aspects, the authors of the *ekphraseis* seek to convey the experience of sacred space in which the seen and the unseen, the tangible and the intelligible are equally real.

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